

Sermon - Easter 5, Year B
Philip and the Ethiopian
4/28/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most powerful prayers in scripture – one of the most powerful prayers of all time – comes to us from the lips of Mary at the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verse 38. The angel, Gabriel, crashes onto the scene and proclaims, “Greetings, highly favored one!” and describes the miracle of the birth of the Son of God to take place. Mary listens for a moment. She asks questions. And while the impossibility of this holy mystery still consumes her, she offers a radical prayer: “be it unto me according to thy word.” Let it be with me according to thy word.

This prayer contains such grace and power, because it places God fully in charge. Mary does not pray to understand what has happened in that room or what will happen in the days ahead. She doesn’t pray for health or success or wisdom – simply that whatever she has to offer in the world be fully embraced and molded and sent forth according to the perfect and glorious will of God. It is a prayer or recognition that she is not the author of the story. The Pentecost has not yet happened, and yet somehow Mary has a sense that the Spirit of God will carry her precisely where God has prepared for her to be.

We are still a few weeks away from the celebration of Pentecost in the church’s liturgical year, but all throughout this season of Easter, we gather together to worship God and we hear selections from the Acts of the Apostles for our first reading. The Acts of the Apostles was authored by the very same evangelist who authored the Gospel of Luke. Luke describes in his Gospel the events from the birth up Jesus up through his death, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven, and Acts begins with his Ascension and proceeds through the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the very beginnings of the Christian Church, and the adventurous preaching of the Gospel out

from Jerusalem to the far flung regions of the earth. It is perhaps the best adventure story in the Bible.

If you spend some time with the Acts of the Apostles, it becomes clear that the hero of this adventure story is not the disciples. It's not Mary, or even Paul, or any of the other key players we meet throughout the book. The hero of the story is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, who drives the action of the story and makes vivid the continuing care of Jesus Christ for his fledgling Church. The Holy Spirit opens things up. It – or He or She – breaks barriers down. The Holy Spirit pours out upon the world like spring rain in the desert, nourishing and surprising a world that has suddenly been made new.

The whole book of Acts is the story of people of all kinds permitting the Holy Spirit to be the author of their lives. It is a book of disciples and kings and peasants and priests and foreigners and the sick and the poor and the rich and the ordinary – all praying with one breath: “Be it unto me according to thy word.”

Today's story of the apostle Philip and the man from Ethiopia is a clear example of this adventure. It is quite clear from the beginning to the end that neither Philip, nor the man from Ethiopia is in charge here. Right away we hear that the angel of the Lord insists: “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” And Philip does just this, even though, as we hear, it is a wilderness road. Upon this road, Philip meets one of the most unexpected possible people. A foreigner, not just from another province, but another continent entirely – an Ethiopian, and a remarkable one at that. He is no ordinary man, but a high official of the queen's court. He is a eunuch – castrated in order that he might serve close to the queen as the head of her treasury. He is an outsider in every dimension of imagination. And yet – this man has heard of the glory of God. He is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Every cultural and religious reality of Philip would have instructed him to have nothing to do with this stranger he meets

upon the road. And yet “the Spirit said to Philip: Go over to this chariot and join it.” The stranger invites Philip to sit beside him, and then Philip interprets the scriptures for him. The text tells us that the stranger is quickly moved to be baptized – to be welcomed into the fullness of what the promise of this sacred text proclaims. Together, they enter into the waters. Two players in the most unexpected adventure, rejoicing in holiness at the invitation of the Spirit of God.

So often in life – even in the Christian life – we human beings are convinced that we are the authors of our own story. We are the main character, the one with agency and desires. Even in our prayer, it is easy to fall into patterns of centering ourselves. I know I am guilty of this: “Lord, please do this. Lord, help me bear this in this particular way.” Self-direction is a condition that is most often rewarded. And yet Jesus is clear: “apart from me, you can do nothing.”

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is just one example of how we, as people of faith, are invited to live a different way. We are invited to make the first prayer on our lips proclaim with boldness: “be it upon me according to thy word.” We are invited to allow the graceful and adventurous Holy Spirit to be the primary author of our entire miraculous life.

The Spirit bids us to release our tight hold upon the things in our life that are not God. Release your expectations. Perhaps you are meant to be sent down a strange, wilderness road, and it is there you will encounter angels. Perhaps you are meant to become companion and friend to the most unexpected of persons. Perhaps you are meant to lead others to life-giving water. Perhaps you are meant to be caught up in the extraordinary whirlwind of a life of discipleship. No matter who we are or what stage of life we find ourselves within – the scriptures are clear: turn over each day to the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, and absolutely nothing will be impossible. We will be given the courage to walk even the wildest wilderness road. Lord, be it unto your Church according to thy word. Amen.